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of Scotland

# ‘Remember Now Thy Creator’

Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872

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## CHAPTER 5

# Distinctive features of embroidered samplers

The most common form of embroidered sampler in Scotland has at least one alphabet as a main component. Sometimes alphabets covered the whole sampler, sometimes a quarter with small motifs filling in the spaces, while others are half and half (illus 5.1 and 5.2). The next most popular type is the pictorial sampler where a scene of some sort is worked, possibly with an alphabet, more usually with a verse of some kind. Less common are more specialised ones. These include techniques found in Dresden and Ayrshire, two types of white-on-white embroidery. Girls who later went on to use their embroidery skills professionally could have worked these samplers, although examples are known by girls who would not need to earn their living. For example, Elizabeth Gardner in Glasgow worked four in the period 1818 to 1822, one of them a Dresden work sampler (illus 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6). It was, however, not uncommon for girls

**OPPOSITE. 5.1** Elspat Macdonald's sampler, about 1840 to 1850, shows how the sampler developed in the schools that were set up in villages and towns for those less able to pay for education. She has worked several alphabets in various coloured wools on linen, mostly stitched in cross stitch but with one in eyelet stitch. She very helpfully gives her birth date as April 1834 and this identifies her as the daughter of George McDonald and his wife Margaret McRobert of Inverness. Although she has a row of very prominent initials in blue and red they are not her parents' and there are such a wide variety of last initials that they may all be her school friends. 20½ in (51 cm) x 20½ in (51 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

to work more than one sampler. Mary Lindsay at Balcarres asked her mother to tell Miss Innes of Stow that 'My first sampler is finished and I am begun my second.'<sup>134</sup>

### MULTIPLICATION TABLES

Most of the samplers featuring multiplication tables appear to have been worked by Scottish girls, though there are some from elsewhere (illus 5.7). The tables were probably copied from a printed source although occasionally a mistake can be found. However, the chanting of the times-tables by rote in schools was not uncommon even in the mid-twentieth century, so girls may well have relied on this to sew their samplers.<sup>135</sup> It is not clear how they would be used in school, if at all.

### EMBROIDERED MAPS

Embroidered maps are usually classed with samplers, although they are more like embroidered pictures than true samplers. Some were bought from print sellers, with the design already printed onto silk or satin; others were free-drawn onto the fabric (illus 5.8). Laurie & Whittle of London produced a fine map of Scotland in 1797, complete with a man in a Highland kilt in a cartouche, and several of these survive (illus 5.9).<sup>136</sup>



LEFT. 5.2 Mary Portes, 1761. Mary is probably the daughter of John Porteous of Broughton, Peebles, baptised on 8 January 1751. She has worked a crowded piece with several alphabets and initials in different colours and bands of floral motifs. 20 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (52.7 cm) x 13 in (33 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

OPPOSITE. 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6 Elizabeth Gardner worked four samplers dated between 1818 and 1822 that show the kinds of work done by a middle-class girl. Elizabeth was born in 1806, the daughter of Andrew Gardner, mathematical optician in Glasgow. Her first sampler is the traditional red and green alphabet worked in wool on coarse linen, with crowns and initials. In 1820 she made a more elaborate, but still very traditional, sampler now faded to pale red and dark blue-green in silk on linen, with alphabets, bands and small motifs. Her third sampler dated 1821 is of Dresden work stitches in muted red and green silk worked on linen. Unusually she has worked her name, place and date at the bottom and an alphabet, partly lower case and partly upper case. The fourth sampler is a small white one divided into nine squares of four darning and five hollie point patterns. Elizabeth's samplers remained together in her family until recently which has made it possible to see how a girl graduated to more difficult embroidery techniques. Elizabeth married John Spencer and had three children, including a daughter Ann who worked a rather plain letter only sampler in 1846. 1= 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (47.6 cm) x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$  in (34.3 cm); 2= 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (29.8 cm) x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (22.2 cm); 3= 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  in (29.2 cm) x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (22.2 cm); 4= 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  in (24.1 cm) x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (27.3 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

5.3



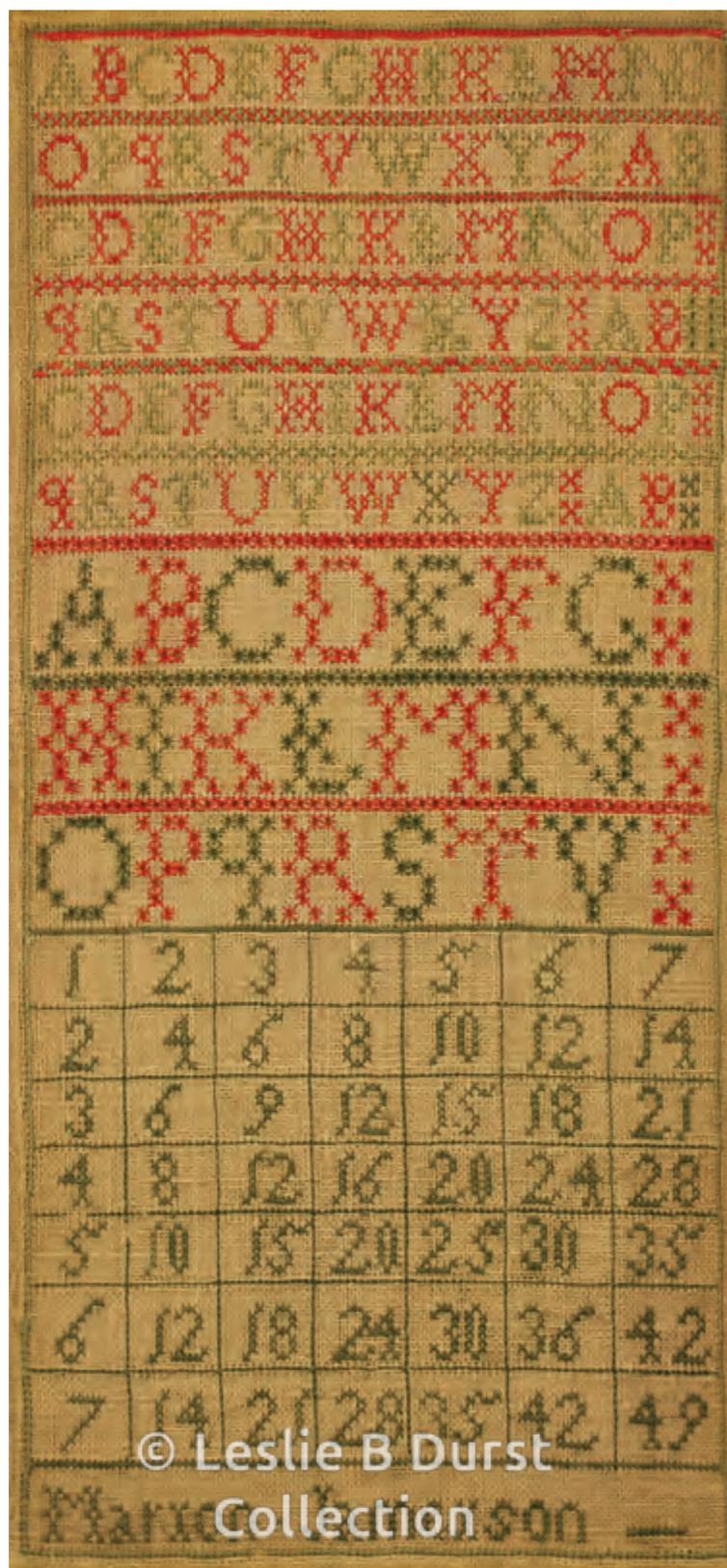
5.4



5.5



5.6



5.7 Marion Jameison has divided her sampler in half with alphabets at the top and a multiplication table of one to seven below. It is neatly stitched but there is no date or other means of being able to identify her. 18 in (45.7 cm) x 8¼ in (22.2 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

Another popular print for embroidery was ‘The World with all the Modern Discoveries’, by an unknown publisher. It shows the world in two hemispheres with the major discovery routes marked, including those of Captain Cook, and usually has a wreath of flowers as a border.<sup>137</sup> Map samplers were probably used as part of a pupil’s geography lessons, although there is no firm evidence for this, unlike the small embroidered satin globes that were made and used by girls at the Quaker school in Westtown, Pennsylvania.

### POLITICAL SUBJECTS

Political events are rarely mentioned on samplers but there are some exceptions. The most notable in Scotland is the Culloden sampler, referring to the Battle of Culloden in 1746 when the government forces defeated the Jacobite rebel army led by Prince Charles Edward Stewart (illus 5.10).<sup>138</sup> Others have GR II or III on them, revealing perhaps sympathy with the government of the day rather than with the Jacobite cause, but on the whole the political turmoils of the day seem to have been of little concern to the girls making samplers.

### DARNING SAMPLERS

Darning samplers were popular throughout Britain and the Continent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Darning was a great skill because it required the mending of holes or worn places in fabrics that might have a patterned weave, such as linen damask (illus 5.11). Darning samplers are rarely dated, but often have initials worked into them. They were also part of the plain sewing exercises, but decorative darning samplers survive too, sometimes with embroidered motifs in one square. It is usually impossible to tell where a darned sampler has been made without some supporting evidence.<sup>139</sup> Girls at the Quaker School at Ackworth usually worked their darning samplers on very fine muslin.<sup>140</sup> There are a few curious examples that are different, of which those that survive all appear to come from



ABOVE. 5.8 Helen Kay's map dated 1816 has probably been hand traced from a print. It records Europe before the results of the Treaty of Vienna after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo the year before. Helen was the daughter of William Kay and Euphans Elder of Lanark, Lanarkshire, born 23 August 1807. 17¼ in (43.8 cm) x 20¾ in (52.7 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

RIGHT. 5.9 Laurence & Whittle, 1797, printed map sampler. 17 in (43.2 cm) x 14½ in (36.8 cm). This sampler is reproduced full page size opposite the title page. Leslie B Durst Collection.



B D F H K L M N O P Q R S T V W X Z I 3 5 7 9 II  
N C E G H I L K P R T V W X Y Z - III RCH - THE IO 4  
E O T S M E L M H O P Q R S T V W X Y Z

X B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V W

X Y Z A B C D E F G H I K L

M N O P Q R S T V W X Y Z



XT CYLLODE MYR PETER LAW



Scotland. These do not start with a piece of cloth with holes cut in it, as in true darning samplers, but like the hollie point samplers a structure of bands of linen tape is used at right angles, creating a number of spaces. The linen tape acts as an anchor for the stitches. The coloured threads are then woven by needle to create patterns of basic weaving designs, such as stripe, check, twill and herringbone, and there are usually three rows of three patterns, nine in all, and the threads are silk in bright colours. These samplers might therefore be termed 'needle weaving' samplers, but they are not made as patterns for weaving, as women did not do this activity. Men were the handloom weavers and the job of the women was to keep the male weaver supplied with spun yarn. These samplers can therefore be seen as another form of darning sampler, making the embroiderer aware of the structure of a woven cloth she might have to darn.<sup>141</sup>

#### DRESDEN WORK

Dresden work is the name given to white-on-white embroidery usually worked on fine linen and imitating handmade lace of the same period. It was particularly popular in the mid to late eighteenth century for sleeve frills and ruffles, headdresses and neck handkerchiefs.<sup>142</sup> It was cheaper than the lace of the period and because it was worked on a woven cloth, not created by needle or bobbin as was lace, it had a more substantial appearance. Later some of the same stitches were used in the working of the early to mid nineteenth-century white-on-white embroidery known as Ayrshire needlework. Dresden work is pulled thread work: the stitches were pulled tight to create openwork panels within the design, so the base fabric had to be of a fairly open weave in a very fine thread.

**OPPOSITE. 5.10** The Culloden sampler, 1746. This is one of the few samplers found with any reference to a contemporary event. Presumably Peter Law, shown killing a kilted Highlander, was a government soldier, but despite the other initials it has not so far been possible to identify Peter or who made the sampler, presumably a daughter or sister. Reproduced by kind permission of National Trust for Scotland.



**5.11** Darning piece from Margaret Alexander's book of samplers, 1831. Kildare Place Society Archives, by permission of the Church of Ireland College of Education.

Little is known about Dresden work in Scotland. Teachers were advertising the teaching of white work throughout the eighteenth century but this may well have changed over time as different styles became popular. In the early period hollie point was probably the most in demand, as it is found on babies' caps and shirts of the time. This was a form of needle lace, created by the needle, that required the stitches to be attached to the linen fabric as a base.<sup>143</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century the term 'white work' could well have meant Dresden work. The best examples were probably worked professionally, that is by women whose sole job was making this embroidery.

To teach them the working of these stitches girls were given a coarse canvas and coloured silk threads.<sup>144</sup> The resulting samplers rarely have names or dates, but those that do, together with the distribution of these pieces, suggest that they were mainly a Scottish type. Another clue is the fact that those that survive are mostly worked in red and green (illus 5.12). There are other samplers with the stitches worked in white-on-white, almost as fine as the work on surviving garments, which could be from other parts of Britain, and continental ones are known, but these teaching samplers on coarse fabric would seem to be Scottish.



5.12 Coarse linen worked in rust and dark green silk showing twenty-one different stitches to be used for Dresden work. It is from the collection of Miss Janet Campbell, ‘a descendent of one of the founders of the Glasgow Sewed Muslin industry’. 16¼ in (41.3 cm) x 8 in (20.3 cm). Private collection, photograph by Ken Smith.

### AYRSHIRE NEEDLEWORK

Ayrshire needlework is a style of embroidery that takes its name from the fact that women in Ayrshire worked it, but it grew out of the earlier tambouring of fine muslin.<sup>145</sup> So far, no samplers of tambouring have been found with a Scottish provenance and very few Ayrshire work ones.<sup>146</sup> Tambouring is worked on fine muslin with a hooked needle, the fabric stretched tight over a hoop like a drum skin, hence its name from ‘tambour’, the French for drum. It was a style of needlework from India and became very popular in Europe, worked in coloured silks, usually on fine white muslin but also white-on-white, replacing Dresden as a form of lighter embroidery. An Italian, Luigi Ruffini, who set up a workshop in Edinburgh in 1783 employing young girls,

introduced tambouring to Scotland.<sup>147</sup> The new embroidery quickly spread to the west of Scotland, as is recorded in some of the parishes in the *Statistical Account of Scotland* published in the 1790s. It was a home industry but mainly a professional type of work and not something that most women, as untrained amateurs, would have been capable of doing to the same standard, although it was included in some embroidery manuals.<sup>148</sup>

The introduction of a new style that became known as Ayrshire needlework is credited to Lady Eglinton, widow of the eldest son of the Earl of Montgomerie. In about 1814 she brought home with her a baby robe worked by a French woman, which had inset filling stitches.<sup>149</sup> This she lent to a Mrs Jamieson, who copied the stitches and taught them to women she employed, presumably as tambourers. Those who



5.13 Small square sampler in brightly coloured silk threads showing various fabric ground designs for darning, with needle lace in the centre. Each square is attached to a white linen tape that is then covered by blue ribbon. Early nineteenth century, probably worked by a member of the Robertson family of Selkirk.  $6\frac{3}{8}$  in (16.2 cm) x  $6\frac{1}{2}$  in (16.5 cm). NMS A.1962.507.



5.14 Beatrice Guild's small Ayrshire needlework sampler is edged with handmade bobbin lace, which was probably bought rather than made by her. According to a note on the back, she made it in about 1834. Beatrice was born on 7 January 1822, the youngest child of James Guild, distiller, and Margaret Morrison of Alloa, Clackmannanshire.  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in (13.9 cm) x  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in (14 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

worked Ayrshire needlework were known as 'floo'ers' (flowerers) because the designs were basically floral. This became a booming industry in Ayrshire with the advent of new fashions in the 1820s and 1830s, such as very large collars, known as pelerines, and embroidered handkerchiefs. Another area was the making of baby caps and baby robes, often today erroneously called christening robes; they were a baby's smart dress worn when shown off to friends and relations. Christenings at this period were not usually the elaborate ceremonies that later became popular.

There are known to have been schools for teaching this work, for example in Paisley, and the lack of samplers for showing the workings of the stitches suggests it was not taught much at ordinary girls' schools, although one sampler is known, worked by Beatrice Guild in about 1834

(illus 5.14).<sup>150</sup> Ayrshire is a very delicate and intricate style of needle lace stitches worked to fill holes cut into the fabric, so required a high level of skill. It is believed that the flowerers specialised, some working the flowers and some the infills, but there has been no detailed work done on this aspect of the industry.<sup>151</sup> It was, however, organised like many other home industries, with the cloth and threads being given out by a man who travelled round a district. He collected the finished work and it was then sent to Glasgow for cutting out and sewing into garments, washing and pressing, before being exported. By the 1840s there was a huge export trade in Ayrshire needlework to Europe and America, but it had to compete with other forms of lace, and later machine embroidery, and declined rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century.